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- Seeking compliance with normative standards for healthy bodies is experienced stressful by ethnic minorities

Experiencing health: how to understand ethnic disparities in health among Danish youth

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Background

Youth is a transitional life phase and research shows that wellbeing and health is easily challenged during youth. In Denmark, ethnic minority youth shows particular vulnerable (e.g. more stress, lower self-esteem, less physical activities). Socio-economic factors effects ethnic disparities in health but the connections between SES and ethnicity are ambiguous. Thus, we need insight into the social dynamics relating to wellbeing and health in daily life, including young people's own experiences of health. This paper explores how young people (age 11-18) understand and experience health and how ethnicity intersects these experiences, and how Danish school institutions affect these experiences. The paper offers empirical insight and analytical discussion to the field of youth ethnic disparities in health.

Methods

The paper draws on two qualitative Danish studies: Study 1, in a primary public school (5th Grade, age 11-12, and 7th Grade, age 12-14, n=55) and Study 2 in an upper secondary school (2nd year, age 16-18, n=40). Both: equal ethnic minority/majority distribution. The studies used ethnographic field-work, interviews, focus groups and visual, participatory research methods (e.g. photographic projects).

Results

Students in both studies experienced health ambiguously: normativity was central in descriptions of health, defined as 'prober' lifestyles building on standards of the morally 'right' body, appearance and behaviour (e.g. eating). Health was also described holistically placing friends and emotional life central. Finally, health was expressed existentially; as empowerment in own life, as a sense of belonging and feeling included.

Conclusions

Ethnic minorities and majorities express similar experiences of health, but ethnic minority students express more stress and feelings of exclusion than ethnic majorities. Often feelings of exclusion relate to feelings of not being able to reach standards of 'normal' appearance and health performance.

Key messages:

- Health plays a central role the young people's self-perceptions and feelings of belonging